Current State and Future Prospects of Chinese Collections in North American Libraries

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The topic I have been asked to speak on is a very large one for the time allowed this morning. Time is not the only constraint; a more important concern is the lack of sufficient quantitative and qualitative data on Chinese collections in North American libraries for the last five or ten years. Lacking such data, my remarks will necessarily be somewhat impressionistic and speculative, based largely on personal observations.

In the 1976-1980 Committee on East Asian Libraries (CEAL) survey, ninety libraries reported on the extent of their Chinese collections, with a total of over 4.5 million volumes. The 1981-1985 survey has not yet been published, but the latest annual survey, compiled by Min-chih Chou (Cornell University) and his Task Force and published in the June 1989 issue of CEAL Bulletin (No. 87, pp. 44-48), lists a total of 52 million volumes, but reported by only forty-six libraries. This represents an increase of 12 percent over the 1976-1980 figures. Since only about one half of the ninety libraries that reported to the earlier survey responded this time, it is safe to assume that the total increase would indeed be higher than just 12 percent. While the field continues to grow, the rate of growth has slowed in comparison with previous years. For example, the average percentage of increase for the 1971-1975 period was 25 percent, and for the 1976-1980 period 18 percent. What does this signify? This slower growth points to the fact that the combination of the publishing explosion, especially in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the last several years, and the devaluation of the American dollar has taken a heavy toll on our purchasing power. At the same time, foundation and government support of area studies at universities was being cut back, and claims for support for new library projects such as automation were on the increase. It would indeed be a rare case nowadays when an East Asian library could boast of adequate funding for all its needs. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to notice that today there are seventeen Chinese collections with holdings of more than 100,000 volumes as compared to only twelve reported by the 1976-1980 survey.

This indeed is welcome news. But the real question is: are we keeping up with what has been published? This, unfortunately, cannot be answered with any certainty without further study and analysis. A limited study I did last year analyzing nine large East Asian libraries' acquisitions of PRC materials might be of some relevance. My study, using as a base for comparison the 1984 official PRC publishing data which are the latest available with a detailed breakdown by subject categories, revealed that the average annual number of books acquired from the PRC by these nine libraries was about 4,300 titles (from a low of 2,500 to a high of 7,600, with most clustering around 4,000 to 5,000); the average number of periodicals was 840 (ranging from 620 to 1,270); and the average number of newspapers was 43 (ranging...
from 10 to 117). Not counting publications in the natural sciences and technology, textbooks, and pictorial materials, of which little or none is collected by American libraries, we find that these nine libraries were collecting from 15.7 percent to 47.74 percent of the 15,918 titles of books published in the social sciences and humanities; from 43.94 percent to 90 percent of the 1,411 periodicals; and from .009 percent to 11.24 percent of the 1,041 newspapers. I must hasten to add here that the library that was receiving the largest number of periodicals included in its report many titles in the natural sciences and technology.

In addition to the types of materials excluded from our collecting as mentioned above, there are also areas in which we collect only selectively such as popular contemporary fiction and translations of foreign literature, both of which have proliferated in recent years. Also, it is likely that among the rather large number of reprints that have been issued, many were already collected by American libraries at the time of their first publication. Taking all this into consideration, the nine libraries' coverage of PRC materials is not bad, particularly those whose acquisitions fell around or exceeded the range of 4,000 to 5,000 titles. Of course, among the conspicuous lacunae remain many of the books published by local publishers in small editions, and the neibu materials that are not allowed to be exported. Regarding the latter, it should be noted that some continue to be available from Hong Kong, and more have been brought back by visiting scholars; many of these are being reprinted by the Center for Chinese Research Materials. I might also add that a new journal, CCP Research Newsletter, has as one of its major functions the review and announcement of PRC neibu publications available at libraries and research centers in the United States.

Of the more than 4,000 periodical titles published in China today, less than half are made available for foreign subscription. The 1988 catalog of the China National Publishing Industry Trading Corporation (CNPITC) offered 1,796 periodicals for this purpose, with more than half in the natural sciences and technology. When the nine libraries receive from 620 to 1,270 periodicals, the record is a very good one indeed. But the newspaper collection is, in comparison, rather disappointing. The 1988 catalog of the China International Book Corporation (Guoji Shudian) offered seventy-seven titles for foreign subscription, including the formerly classified Jiefangjun bao (Liberation Army News). The 1988 CNPITC catalog lists 148 newspapers for which they will take foreign orders. Considering that the average number of newspaper subscriptions among the nine libraries was only 43 (ranging from 10 to 117), that leaves a great deal of room for improvement. The analysis above deals with the PRC only. Perhaps we are doing better with Taiwan and Hong Kong publications, but that supposition must await confirmation.

I have dwelt at length on collection development because I believe, and I think you will agree with me, that collection development is at the heart of a research library's work and should always be our first priority. Directly related to collection development is the large stride we have made in the area of resource sharing. As already mentioned, the publishing explosion, the devaluation of the American dollar, and the spiraling costs of maintaining research collections have made self-sufficiency of research libraries a thing of the past. Resource sharing has instead become the modus operandi in collection development. The introduction of automation in libraries and the creation of library networks have further hastened and facilitated this concept of mutual dependence. The experience of East Asian libraries indicates that, while a national cooperative program in acquisitions is impractical, a great deal can be achieved on a regional basis. The example of the University of California at Berkeley (UC-Berkeley) and Stanford is a case in point. The East
Asiatic Library at UC-Berkeley and the East Asian Collection of the Hoover Institution at Stanford have instituted cooperative acquisitions programs for Chinese newspapers and local histories, and they consult with each other when considering purchases of expensive materials. A similar program is now in effect among six East Asian libraries on the East Coast—Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and the New York Public Library. Under this program each takes primary responsibility for collecting all available periodicals and newspapers in a given number of provinces. It is possible that this arrangement can be extended to cover other materials of a local nature, including xian (county) gazetteers on the post-1949 period, which are projected to be published in the thousands by the early 1990s. The six libraries have already compiled a preliminary version of a union catalog of their Chinese newspaper holdings, and a similar union list of their periodicals is a distinct possibility.

One cannot comment on the current state of Chinese collections without also mentioning the far-reaching change that has taken place in East Asian libraries during the last five years; that is the adoption of automation. Since the introduction of the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) Chinese-Japanese-Korean (CJK) system in 1987, East Asian libraries have undergone a fundamental change that has permanently altered the way they operate. While automation is nothing new to the library world, its application to East Asian libraries with its ability to process Chinese, Japanese, and Korean scripts is a first and represents a major breakthrough in library technology. While online cataloging has become routine in East Asian libraries and our capability to provide reference service has also been greatly enhanced through the use of automation, we have yet to reach the point where available technology is used to our full advantage. I have particularly in mind the question of retrospective conversion. I understand the University of California at Los Angeles has been making plans to convert its East Asian records into machine-readable form. It would be interesting to see how that project develops. If successful it may very well be something which other East Asian libraries can emulate.

Another important development in our field is preservation. As in automation, East Asian libraries have followed in the footsteps of the academic libraries at large in this development. Individual libraries such as Columbia and Harvard have had modest programs in microfilming preservation in the past, and several RLIN libraries are now engaged in a cooperative effort in getting some of the fragile 20th-century Chinese publications preserved on microfilm. Due to the magnitude of needs, however, a national effort must be made to attack the problem on a massive scale. The feasibility for such a program looks quite good now that the Congress has appropriated tens of millions of dollars through the National Endowment for the Humanities for preservation projects at various academic and research libraries. It is not impossible that within this framework a coordinated national program for Chinese and other East Asian-language materials can be attempted. On the question of preserving Chinese-language materials, acknowledgment must be made for the work that has been done by the Center for Chinese Research Materials (CCRM). For more than twenty years CCRM, through its reproduction program, has also functioned successfully as a center for preservation. The more in this area CCRM can do, the less the rest of us will have to do.

Looking to the future we may ask: where are the Chinese collections headed? Several trends seem to be shaping up in the field. In the first place, unless financial support for East Asian libraries across the board is increased, we will all be forced to acquire less and thereby become less able to satisfy the demands of our clientele. This financial stringency, if it continues, will probably affect the smaller libraries
more than the larger ones, thus making them more dependent upon the larger libraries for the purpose of resource sharing. But even the larger libraries will likely not be able to do all that needs to be done and will want to develop more resource-sharing programs among themselves. Secondly, automation will demand that our bibliographers, order librarians, and public service librarians also acquire certain skills in adapting their work to a completely automated environment which already exists in some libraries and will surely be in others in the not too distant future. From the viewpoint of the library administration, automation also means that there will be some basic changes made in the library's organization and in the allocation of human and material resources. Thirdly, I believe we will continue to struggle with the perennial problems of how to train and where to find qualified book selectors who possess the prerequisite expertise in a wide range of subject matters, extensive bibliographical knowledge of the field, and the energy and creativeness for collection building. Lastly, in our expanding contact with libraries, librarians, publishers, and book dealers in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, our relationship with the PRC will continue to offer the most challenge. While our broadening relationship with the PRC offers us a number of opportunities favorable to our collection development work, the experience of American libraries in this regard so far indicates that the nurture and maintenance of this relationship is by no means an easy task, requiring as it does a great deal of time, patience, and perseverance. Chinese studies librarians will by necessity also have to become diplomats and facilitators in all imaginable kinds of situations.

As I mentioned at the outset, these observations are impressionistic and speculative. I welcome your comments and criticisms.

(This article is adapted from a talk given at the Plenary Session of the 1989 Annual Meeting of the Committee on East Asian Libraries, Association for Asian Studies, March 16, at Washington, D.C.)